

From Batts Hall to the Pink Dome

The Texas Politics Project and Government Department Internship Program

The picture postcard view of the Texas Capitol dome from the top of the South Mall is only a few steps from the front doors of Batts Hall, the Government Department's home since 2002. Having the seat of state government down the street provides students and faculty entree into direct political participation.



Inside view of the Capitol dome from the rotunda.

“We’ve developed initiatives that feed into the role a major public university is obligated to play in the civic life of the state,” says James Henson, a government lecturer and director of the Texas Politics Project. “Everything aims at creating a richer environment in which everyone from students to average citizens to researchers can engage with politics and government in Texas.”

The department’s long running internship program provides a venue for University of Texas at Austin students to spend a semester working in a legislative office or other political job while registered in a course that infuses academic context into their experience.

The internship program is now supplemented by the Texas Politics Project, an active fusion of teaching, research and public outreach activities that focuses on politics, government and public service in Texas.

Evolving in tandem since 2003, the two programs provide a network of contacts and activities strengthening the natural connections between The University of Texas and Capitol communities. Henson oversees both.

The internship program provides a reliable channel for students to engage in practical learning about politics — and for some who embrace the challenges of politics as a vocation, to embark on careers.

The Texas Politics Project provides venues for learning about politics and for interaction among students, the general public and public officials.

“I am proud to be both a contributor to and a consumer of Dr. James Henson’s Texas Politics Project,” says Harvey Kronberg, editor and publisher of the Quorum Report, an influential Texas political newsletter. “I have been invited to participate on numerous panels by Henson and have

always come away invigorated by the level of the conversation and impressed by the interactions with the students and faculty who attend.

“And I confess that despite being a political ‘professional,’ I have on more than one occasion found myself searching the Project’s online textbook to confirm what I think I know about the mechanics of Texas government.”

The Political Internship Program

The internship program allows students to combine public service with intellectual reflection on their experience. In a series of essays for the course, the interns situate their experiences within a broader analysis of politics as a profession.

The internships follow the rhythm of the political system. The Legislature is a steady venue for internships which increase in number every other year when lawmakers are in session. During election years, some students gravitate to the roller coaster experience of campaign work. State agencies, particularly the Office of the Attorney General, attract a steady stream of students.

Following the evolution of state politics, more and more students intern with the advocacy groups, political consultants and lobbying firms representing the increasingly professionalized business of politics.

But the program’s touchstone remains the Texas Legislature, where numerous former interns and other alumni hold prominent staff positions and work for the many advocacy organizations whose representatives roam the Capitol halls. They include Abril Davila who interned for Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Rick Noriega in 2008, earned her bachelor’s degree in government in 2009 and now attends The University of Texas School of Law.

“The internship program was an unforgettable, inspiring and constructive experience,” says Davila. “It enabled me not only to comprehend politics more deeply, but to gain a clearer understanding of my personal relationship to the political profession.”

Alumni at the Capitol can join the recently established [“UT Government Interns Past and Present” Facebook group](#).



State representative Mark Strama (D-Austin) and College of Liberal Arts Dean Randy Diehl discuss technology and Texas with students during the Texas Politics Speaker Series.

Texas Politics Project

The Texas Politics Project began as an experiment to develop an online government textbook infused with video, interactive features and rich data. The primary goal was to use multimedia to engage students more fully with the hope of cultivating a more civic-minded citizenry.

The multimedia textbook features video interviews and lectures by current and former state officials, media figures, faculty and former interns, all of whom address subject matter covered by the text from a fresh, frequently firsthand perspective.

The online textbook is now used in several University of Texas classes each semester, as well as by high school, community college and university students across the state. The site has also become an online reference tool for the general public, and traffic on the site spikes whenever Texas politics is in the news.

The Texas Politics Speaker Series hosts several talks a year and increasingly co-sponsors events with organizations such as the LBJ School of Public Affairs Center for Politics and Governance, and The Texas Tribune, the nonprofit online political Web site launched in 2009. [The Texas Politics Web site](#) posts and archives video from each event, with short excerpts edited for instructional use and public interest.

An especially exciting development, The University of Texas at Austin Texas Politics Poll was launched in July 2008 by Professor Daron Shaw, marking a major step forward in measuring public opinion in Texas. In October 2009, Department of Government researchers welcomed The Texas Tribune as project collaborators.

The poll accurately predicted the outcome in this year's gubernatorial primaries.

“We anticipate this as just the start of ongoing collaboration in nonpartisan public opinion polling and open access to data about politics and government,” says Henson, who earned his Ph.D. in the Government Department in 1996 and returned to establish the Texas Politics Project.

“At the time the UT Poll was launched, Texas had no regularly occurring, nonpartisan poll from which data are made available for public use. Our poll fills this gap by providing a much-needed measure of public opinion among adult citizens of Texas,” Henson says.

“The collaboration with The Texas Tribune is also part of an ongoing effort to generate the external support necessary to continue the Texas Politics Project.”

Conducted entirely online, and in conjunction with YouGOV/Polimetrix, a company well known for its innovative Internet-based survey techniques, the UT-Austin/Texas Tribune poll is notable for its substantive contribution and its cutting edge research design.

The poll is designed to provide educational and research resources to students, educators and the general public. Survey data are available to researchers and the public. Graphs and charts are designed to make data available and accessible to everyone interested in Texas politics and government.

[See polling, video and more politics.](#)